Jerani Ratnayake, intransigent fighter for Trotskyism, dies at age 73

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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With a great sense of loss, we report the untimely death of comrade Jerani Ratnayake, a life-long member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

After being hospitalised with COVID-19 for several days, she died in the early hours of Friday, July 8 due to a heart attack in a Colombo hospital.

Jerani was the wife and lifelong partner of Kamilasiri Ratnayake, the national editor of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in Sri Lanka. She leaves behind her son, Jayan Ratnayake, daughter, Vaneja Ratnayake, their spouses and four grandchildren.

Jerani was a tenacious fighter for Trotskyism in her own right. She was born on February 7, 1949 in Colombo. Her family was living in Mount Lavinia, on the southern outskirts of the city, and her father worked at the Colombo Municipal Council. Her early education was at the Girls' High School in Mount Lavinia.

Ever since the formal end of British colonial rule in 1948, successive Colombo governments have responded to every serious political crisis by fomenting communal hatreds. The first major anti-Tamil riots took place in 1958, under the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government. It had come to power in 1956 on the communal program of making Sinhala the country's only official language—a policy that relegated the island's Tamil minority to second-class citizens.

Following the anti-Tamil riots in 1958, Jerani's father was forced to return to Jaffna. Hundreds of Tamils living in the Colombo area, including Jerani's family, were put on a ship and sent to Jaffna. Before entering University of Colombo for her Tamil special degree, she went to the highly regarded Vembadi Girls' High School in Jaffna. After graduation she started to work in the Economic Research Department in the Central Bank in 1973.

Jerani met comrades of the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), at the Central Bank and joined the party. From that time, she was deeply committed to the perspective of Trotskyism and an important figure in the RCL's faction within the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU).

Through its intransigent political struggle, the RCL won the leadership of the CBEU, despite the opposition of defenders of capitalism and their "left" stooges. Jerani served on the CBEU executive committee several times and also held the post of assistant treasurer.

Jerani's decision to join the RCL was significant in many ways. She overcame the social barriers, which exist in a backward country like Sri Lanka, to actively participate in politics and was drawn to the party's revolutionary politics and its fight for the unity of the working class, regardless of race, language and gender. Her uncompromising fight for this perspective won the respect of bank workers. Her speeches at CBEU meetings are still recalled by her former co-workers to this day.

In joining the RCL, she rejected the perspective of the petty-bourgeois Tamil nationalist movements, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), that emerged in the 1970s as a consequence of the 1964 betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which entered the bourgeois coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike and her SLFP.

The LSSP, which claimed to be Trotskyist, abandoned socialist internationalism and accommodated to the SLFP's Sinhala populism. In the 1970s, the second Bandaranaike coalition government with the LSSP and Stalinist Communist Party (CP) rammed through a new communal constitution in 1972 and extensive discriminatory measures against Tamils, triggering a wave of opposition among Tamil youth.

Jerani devoted a great deal of her time to Tamil translations for the RCL's Tamil newspaper, *Tholilalar Pathai* (Workers Path). She worked closely with the newspaper's editor, Sabaratnam Rasendran, who died in 2002, and was in the forefront of the RCL's fight against Tamil nationalism. The party also relied on her Tamil language expertise to translate speeches delivered at meetings, including by the founding RCL general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya, for Tamils in the audience.

K. Ratnayake, who also worked in the central bank, was elected as CBEU president in 1974, during the second Bandaranaike coalition government. At the time, the RCL fought the ruthless state repression of the coalition government and in the process exposed the "left" parties such as LSSP as the stooges of capitalism. The party led the CBEU politically, demanding that the LSSP and CP, which falsely claimed to speak in the name of the working class, break from the coalition and fight for a workers' and peasants' government committed to socialist policies.

The RCL group inside the CBEU exposed in particular the pernicious political role of the "left" centrist group led by Tulsiri Andradi. As the SEP explained in its the *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)*:

"Tulsiri Andradi criticised the RCL for creating illusions in the reformist parties—the LSSP and the CP—by demanding they take power. The RCL's demand, however, was not aimed at promoting these parties, but rather at breaking their grip over socialist-minded layers of the working class who still grudgingly looked to the LSSP and CP for leadership. Andradi's left-sounding denunciation was in fact an evasion of the essential political task of exposing the LSSP and CP and thus left workers in the hands of these parties.

"The betrayal of this mass movement by the LSSP, CP and LSSP(R) paved the way for the UNP [United National Party] to return to power. At the July 1977 election, the coalition parties suffered a crushing defeat: the UNP won 140 of the 168 seats, the SLFP retained just 8 seats, and the LSSP and CP lost all their seats."

Young Jerani was a front-line fighter in this principled political struggle. In 1974, she married K. Ratnayake and became his life-long companion and comrade-in-arms. Their children were born in 1976 and 1985. They lived in Ratmalana, an industrial area on the outskirts of Colombo, where their home became a second home for party comrades.

The LSSP's betrayal and its embrace of Sinhala supremacism were major factors in the sellout of the general strike of workers in 1976 against

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SLFP-led coalition government and the coming to power of the right-wing pro-US UNP government of J. R. Jayawardene in 1977. The UNP government was one of the first in the world to implement the pro-market agenda of opening up the country to the unfettered operations of international finance capital.

A second broad-based general strike movement of the working class, centred on the demand for higher pay, erupted in July 1980 against the Jayawardene government. The RCL fought to transform the general strike to a political movement against the government, which was opposed to the fake lefts of the LSSP and CP and their centrist apologists, who declared it was just a pay dispute.

Comrade Jerani participated in the strike along with other RCL members, despite Jayawardene's threat to declare the strike illegal. The treachery of the "left" parties in deliberately limiting the strike opened the door for the government to sack tens of thousands of striking public sector workers.

The mass sackings were a heavy blow to the working class. Both members of the Ratnayake family lost their jobs, like many other RCL members, and faced a very hard time living a hand-to-mouth existence.

In response to the general strike, the UNP turned sharply to whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class. Its anti-Tamil provocations culminated in horrific anti-Tamil pogroms in July 1983, which marked the onset of the bloody communal war against the LTTE that engulfed the island for the next 26 years.

During the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms, pro-government thugs burnt the Ratnayake home to the ground and the family had to take refuge in houses of party members. Jerani and their son Jayan lived in the home of comrade Wije Dias for a period. After moving from house to house for months, the family re-built their burned-down house after Jerani was employed as a new entrant into the Central Bank at the end of 1983.

Throughout the communal war against LTTE by successive Colombo governments, Jerani continued to courageously campaign in the working class for the RCL's perspective. She sold the party's newspapers, *Kamkaru Mawatha* and *Tholilalar Pathai*, in door-to-door campaigns in working class neighborhoods.

During the 1985–86 split of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), Jerani was a staunch supporter of the ICFI in the decisive political struggle against the opportunist and nationalist positions of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). The defeat of the WRP enabled the Trotskyists to assume control of the ICFI and led to a flowering of genuine Marxism, which was crucial in the difficult political struggles in Sri Lanka.

Under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed in July 1987, the Indian government sent troops to northern Sri Lanka to suppress and disarm the LTTE, freeing the Sri Lankan government to unleash state repression against social unrest among Sinhala rural youth in the south of the country.

The RCL opposed the Accord on the basis of fighting for the unity of Tamil and Sinhala workers against both governments. Just two weeks after the Accord was signed, the party held a public meeting on August 16 in Navalar Hall in Nallur (near Jaffna), calling for united working-class opposition to the joint repression unleashed by the Indian and Sri Lanka governments. Jerani played an important role in translating the main speech by comrade K. Ratnayake into Tamil. It was a landmark event in the RCL's fight against communal repression and was prominently reported in the media in Jaffna and South India.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) opposed the Accord on the basis of Sinhala communalism, defending the unity of the nation, not the unity of the working class. Its gunmen shot and killed workers, trade unionists and politicians who opposed its reactionary campaign. In November 1988, the RCL called for a united front of all parties and organisations of the working class to take concrete measures against state repression and the JVP's attacks. The party called for workers' defence squads, action committees and joint picket lines. Three RCL comrades were murdered by JVP thugs during its fascistic rampage in 1988–89.

In 1988, the RCL again won the leadership of the CBEU by fighting for its perspective. The RCL group in the Central Bank played a pivotal role in the campaign for the united front. Jerani was very active in leafletting, campaigning and explaining to co-workers the complex political issues at stake.

In 1996, in the midst of the civil war, the LTTE bombed the Central Bank. Jerani had a narrow escape as she could not report to work that day due to ill health. The RCL lost several comrades in the bombing. Most of the dead and wounded were militant CBEU members. Jerani was deeply saddened by this heinous crime and visited the homes of the victims untiringly one after another.

In 2016, comrade Jerani visited Paris with comrade K. Ratnayake who attended the founding conference of Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), French section of the ICFI. She was remembered by her comrades in France, many of whom are Tamil exiles won to the party, she expressed her happiness that "the energy she had devoted to fighting for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka had played a central role in building a Trotskyist party in France."

Jerani was a sensitive and cultured woman. Literature and music were part of her life. She possessed an aesthetic mind, and enjoyed listening to classical music of many varieties. She was a well-versed reader of classical novels in English and Sinhalese in addition to her native Tamil. Her free time was spent in reading. Biographical novels and movie reviews interested her most. She enjoyed watching movies, historical and theme-based movies in particular.

Among party comrades, Jerani, was fondly known for her generous hospitality and culinary skills. Her home was a rendezvous for comrades, especially during difficult periods when the state repression was intense. She never tired of providing for comrades, irrespective of the numbers, and her home was opened for party activities—including in one period as the party office.

Her political activities continued until, in 2020, her ailments prevented her from engaging with her usual energy and resourcefulness. It is a tragedy that she was hospitalised with COVID-19 and became another victim of the criminal "let it rip" policies of governments in Sri Lanka and around the world.

The SEP salutes the memory of comrade Jerani Ratnayake.

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